Can A Christian Sin?

Based on Matthew 7:15-23

Preached on August 2, 2020

Eighth Sunday after Trinity

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During the pandemic and lockdown, I know of at least one Christian who committed suicide. There have been warnings about the impact of forced isolation on mental health, and suicide is tragic. But it is uniquely tragic in the case of a christian, because it could be that every indication up to that point was that the person was a faithful, devout, humble believer who loved the lord. Then the news of their suicide causes doubt. Did he really have faith, or was he a closet unbeliever? Did he really have faith, only to lose it in the midst of a sudden onset of depression that tempted him to escape it.

The christian is always having to struggle with sin, does suicide mean that such a one lost the struggle?

The reason I bring up this important issue is because of Jesus’ words today. Jesus says, “A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Suicide, is certainly a sin and so “bad fruit” Is Jesus saying here that a christian cannot sin?

We confess this morning, every divine service, and every day that we are by nature sinful and unclean. Even after our baptism and conversion, we recognize that our sinful nature has not been obliterated. Original sin is still with us, even though we have faith. We are diseased with sin, not only before we repent, but while we repent, and after we repent.

Friends in christ, we need to be extremely careful here. There are some complexities when we think of the sin of others, was it premeditated, did they know better, was there time for them to repent, was their repentance sincere? But the Holy Spirit says clearly, “For there is no distinction. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of god.” There is no distinction. So who are we to distinguish which sins are compatible with saving faith and which sins show a faithless heart? The pharisees distinguished between sins of the heart and sins of action, suggesting that desiring the death of another was not sinful, only the acting upon it. But this made them merciless towards prostitutes, sinners and others whose sins were easily seen.

Jesus, our Lord calls for us to be merciful, and the way to do that is to sympathize with other’s weaknesses. And all of our weaknesses are different. I’ve never had to beg for food or any of the necessities of life, let alone be refused even after begging. What would you do if you were starving, and no one would help you. Would you steal bread? You should resist the temptation to steal, and instead pray to our Heavenly Father for our bread. That’s what you ***should*** do...but what ***would*** you do? Are you so certain that you could never fall? Our answers, from a place of comfort right now are irrelevant; it’s easy to say with full bellies that we would never sin when starving. The bottom line is we are all capable of sin, we are all susceptible to temptation, and if we remember that, we remain humble and we can show real mercy to those who stumble.

So, what are we to say then? Everyone’s a sinner, so no one should judge anyone or anything? By no means! Jesus says of false prophets, “You will know them by their fruit.” That means you are to ***judge*** them by their fruit and act accordingly. You are to “beware” of them, because they are a threat. A false prophet is not someone who fails to resist temptation sometimes, he is one who twists God’s word and preaches a false gospel. Sin is and remains a struggle throughout the christians life, but that doesn’t mean he is a false christian. A false christian preaches, believes, and dedicates their life to a false gospel, a twisted gospel that justifies sin apart from the atonement of christ.

The disease of false prophets and christians is not that they have sin, or that they knowingly give in to sin, but that *they do not truly hate their sin*. *Christians do not want to sin, but do*. St. Paul notes this in himself when he says, that the law of his members is enslaved to sin, so that the good he wants to do he doesn’t, and the evil he does not want, he does. It is a comfort to know that St. Paul himself struggled with sin and sometimes did the evil he did not want to do. This is not a comfort that makes you complacent in doing evil, but rather gives you confidence that your *struggles with sin* are not a sign that you are outside the faith, but that you are in it.

Was St. Paul a healthy or diseased tree? Both, and you are both. You are at the same time a sinner and a saint. But Christ gives us the victory. Because, when we die, our diseased tree, our sinful nature, will be burned up and destroyed. But our healthy self, the healthy tree will remain to live in righteousness, holiness and blessedness with Christ forever.

Do not sin. It is bad for you and when you can control it you should. Sin is shameful to God, and the church, it harms your neighbor and it is what nails Jesus to the cross. You are no longer a slave to sin, but a child of light. We are told of the gospel, of good works and the law so that we do not sin, and will not want to sin. But if we do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, even Jesus Christ.

Even though we do sin, we bear good fruit. How can this be? Because, the Lord says to his people, though your sins are red as scarlet, they will be white as snow. Because, all of our works are purified in Christ, and even our sins are offered as holy sacrifices by Christ to the Father in his blood. In the Easter Vigil liturgy, the irony is shown with a fine point on it. Regarding Adam’s eating of the fruit, we say, “O Blessed Sin, which merited so great of a saviour.” Your sin contributed to your salvation.

The sinner will be cast into the fire. But the saint will live forever. In baptism, you have been given a new self.